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Travis Allen
University of Colorado Boulder

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Theater of Memory

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* and an Aesthetics of Reconciliation

Travis Allen

Contents

Apology

It is perhaps tacitly understood that one's methods and approach to a subject necessarily depend to a large degree on the subject itself, that is to say, that what one wants to say gives shape to the way in which it must be said. This understanding is often tacit because it is not often essential to bring direct attention to this fact, as the theoretical underpinning of scholarly investigation in most every field has predecessors to which they can point as justification of its particular methods: for example, a philosopher of language need only point to the work of a Russell or Wittgenstein, and need not necessarily develop his own methods, or justification of them, in order to work out the creation of a logical foundation for language, because that foundation has a long-standing and well-grounded tradition, which can stand in for any explicit statement of method. Similarly–though of course this is perhaps a gross oversimplification–a historical approach to the understanding of art, in both its practice and personalities, has a tradition that allows for certain methods to be adopted in lieu of the need to justify them. We are able, in short, to discuss the historical implications of a particular work or body of work as it has impacted, or ought to impact, the historical development and experience of art. Unfortunate or not, I find it here personally necessary to begin with such an attempt at justification, as my subject is not one that can be so easily subsumed by any tradition of which I am currently aware.

The case is that my subject, Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, requires an approach that can take into account a number of salient facts that do not, in a broad sense, apply to many other art objects: primarily, we must keep in mind that the work no longer physically exists; that the documentation of the work is fragmentary at best, with long gaps in the historical record of its over thirteen year history; that it was never explicitly finished in the artist's understanding of it–though perhaps several times thought to be in a state

of completion; and, finally, that it existed in a highly volatile and ever-expanding state of construction. Not only must we find a way of discussing the work in relation to these highly limiting circumstances, but we must also, I believe, find a method which can, more importantly, find some way of constructing a theoretical framework to justify the experience of such a work as art–specifically, one that no longer exists, nor one that can be grasped in any complete sense. For the aesthetic experience of the *Merzbau* is essentially a mediated one, that mediation being the historical record of its construction. My purpose in writing, therefore, is to attempt an aesthetic rescue of the *Merzbau* before even such a mediated experience disappears into the void of lost time. This aesthetic rescue is dependent on the development of two distinct but, I believe, intricately bound up approaches to art, the first being a reconstruction of that historical record as per the usual rules of art historical criticism; and the second being a theoretical exegesis of art's historical function, such as it finds expression in the works of Walter Benjamin and Peter Bürger, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse; and finally, the application of such a theoretical approach to the *Merzbau* itself.

I draw attention to this because my aim is not only to rescue the *Merzbau* historically, but aesthetically as well. The difference rests principally in that the first seeks merely to place the work in an historical context, to give it an historical value, while the second seeks to return to the work an aesthetic value. What, you may ask, is an "aesthetic value"? At least in distinction to an historical value, which seeks primarily to develop the importance of an event or series of events, as past, that can be seen to shape our present in some way, an aesthetic value, as I understand it, is one in which our present experience can become important for the past. This value can only be rescued, therefore, by finding some way in which the work can still be experienced aesthetically in the present. This is problematic for many works of art, but for different reasons: for example, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, if anything, was never intended to be appreciated at art at all–if we are to prefer his statements on the matter over our own experience of the work (Cabanne 47)–and yet we now see a contemporary art and art criticism extolling the virtues of the ready-made; we could also look at the absurd predicament in which the *Mona Lisa* finds itself, encased in glass and crowded by tourists, denying most every possibility of approaching the work as anything but a cultural spectacle. To return to the point at hand, however, if we can yet experience the *Merzbau* aesthetically, we must find a way in which memory can become an aesthetic experience, or at least a proxy for such an experience. This conviction,

as will be seen, comes out of a proper understanding of Schwitters's artistic practice of Merz, and finds its most evocative expression in the grottoes of the Merzbau. I am strongly against the idea of looking at the documentation of the work as the aesthetic experience, whether it be in photographs or writing, as that seems a simple and unsatisfying way out of the real dilemma, which is how the entirety of the *Merzbau* can be experienced aesthetically–that is, the work that Schwitters experienced. The documentation has an historical importance, as it is the lens through which we see the work; nevertheless, it is not the work itself, and we must therefore inure ourselves from the dangerous position of seeing it aesthetically. What this means is that we must find a way in which memory can serve as the primary–even only–experience of a work of art while preserving the work's value as art and not, as is only too likely, limiting it to a purely historical value. It remains to be seen whether such an approach can overcome the imposing limitations placed upon such an aim, or whether I will only further the physical destruction of the *Merzbau* by destroying it spiritually as well.

Building

The most straightforward way to reconstruct the *Merzbau* is to approach it chronologically. There are two reasons for this: first, that attempting to reconstruct the work atemporally, or in reverse, has the distinct disadvantage of creating unnecessary confusion, and, secondly, that the work is to a large extent the result of a steady accumulation of layers, suggesting, therefore, that one is likely best served by working from its beginnings and innermost layers outwards as much as possible. This provides us the natural benefit of seeing the progression of the work's outward expansion as a movement outward from a core motivation, that is, that the early works compose the foundations and innermost layers of its construction. There are difficulties with this approach insofar as the historical record is often incomplete or contradictory as to the relative chronology of the additions to the work; and, what is more, the only person aside from Schwitters who could have hypothetically seen the whole work was Helma, his wife, suggesting that even when reliable testimony about the work is extant, the probability of such testimony being able to pinpoint the order and magnitude of the *Merzbau*'s accumulation of material, or its specific constituents, is nil. We should not let this deter us, however, as the exact order and placement of materials is, in a certain sense, somewhat inconsequential, as it behooves us more to find the work's general trajectory than to engage in the wild goose chase of pinpointing the exact details of the work: where the first can within reason be reliably plotted, the second is pure fantasy. We should, however, keep the preceding fact in mind in order to avoid the temptation of providing guesses as to precise factors in the work's construction, as it would be both unwise and misleading to point to specific developments in the work without substantial evidence.

In general, the development of the work can be plotted within four distinct periods. The first is the years 1919 to 1924 when Schwitters formulated and, to some extent, formalized his one-man art move-

ment, Merz, and created a few important predecessors to the *Merzbau*. The second is the years from 1924-1933, when the work was still in its infancy and went by an earlier name, *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, or *KdeE* as it is often abbreviated. The third period begins with Hitler's rise to power, during which the majority of the work was constructed; and the final period starts in 1937, and, as I would like to suggest, continues into the present, wherein the total destruction of the *Merzbau* has been accomplished. I would like to take each of these in turn, with the intention of developing both a reconstruction of the work itself, but also, where appropriate, a reconstruction of the social and political climate in Germany. As I hope will become apparent, the choice of separating the life of this work into these four periods coincides not only with artistic developments in Schwitters's life, but also historical developments in interwar Germany. No less, these historical developments in many ways anticipate, or, more strongly, condition Schwitters's interest and changing appreciation of the *Merzbau*, as well as influencing his understanding of Merz.

Before I begin this reconstruction, however, I would like to give as brief an introduction as will serve to indicate the general themes of Schwitters's work. More specifics will be offered later as I turn my attention to an exploration of these themes within the *Merzbau*, but they will make a significant deal more sense with a proper introduction to some overarching trends.

The interpretations of Schwitters's work tend to fall within two camps, one side seeing Schwitters' *oeuvre* as social and political commentary, while the other emphasizes its spiritual and alchemical qualities. The first position is formulated well by Dorothea Deitrich in her *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters*, the second by Elizabeth Burns Gamard in *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. For now it should suffice to point to some of the underlying differences and similarities between these two camps. Significantly, both Deitrich and Gamard characterize Schwitters' artistic practice as a "salvaging operation" (Deitrich 181), one which moreover entails a transformation of trash into art, the poor into the rich, or, to borrow the alchemical metaphor, from lead into gold. This salvaging operation is likewise characterized as "a path of rescue, a means to salvation" (Gamard 28) or a way "to reclaim personal wholeness and control in the face of fragmentation and chaos" (Deitrich 181). Merz art is, then, for both these writers, an attempt to rescue the individual from the precarious and fragmentary material conditions of life into a sense of wholeness. As Deitrich characterizes it, "For [Schwitters], the junk heap of the past harbored the possibility of a new

future that acknowledged fragmentation as a given, but conceived of creativity as an act of redemption" (12).

His art is thus principally a product of his lifelong obsession with retrieving and giving form to the waste of industrial society: there are, of course, numerous accounts of Schwitters collecting, sorting, storing, and Merzing the enormous amount of materials he would gather, both day to day around Hanover and on his many trips around Europe. To provide a sense of scale, Hannah Höch described a trip she took with him in 1926 this way: "As always with Kurt Schwitters, departure was like moving house. He had four or five enormous and as usual idiotically overweight suitcases . . . Three times we had to climb the 107 steps to my studio in order to take everything down" (Webster 184). These suitcases were in all likelihood filled with broken tires, newspaper scraps, wood scraps, metal scraps, toys, packaging–any sort of material he could use in his Merz pictures. Kate Steinitz quotes him as saying, "Helma my dear, preserve everything" (Steinitz 47), which, taken with the account from Höch, must serve to stand as my small way of suggesting that for Kurt, the collection of the past was its preservation and form-giving.

It is with their agreement about Schitters's salvaging operation, however, that the differences begin to arise in Gamard and Deitrich's interpretations, primarily dealing with the status of history and tradition within the *Merzbau*. Gamard sees the work as "transhistorical in nature and therefore at once profoundly sentimental and messianic" (Gamard 24); as such, she consequently diminishes the relevance of contemporary social and political developments in Germany in the 20's and 30's and instead focuses on the spiritual dimensions of the work. Conversely, Deitrich sees Schwitters's work precisely in terms of those developments and therefore emphasizes not redemption in a spiritual sense but in a political one. I would not like to take sides, as each interpretation has a certain validity within its proper principles. Nevertheless, in what immediately follows I am more interested in developing the relation of Schwitters's *Merzbau* to the sociopolitical environment, even though this is perhaps only in order to speak to the spiritual dimensions afterwards. What is more important, then, is to work towards overcoming these differences in the creation of a synthesis between the political and spiritual dimensions of the work, as it is in many ways both material and spirit, and requires that we incorporate both aspects into our interpretation.

The final consideration before we move into the history of the work itself is the extent to which

Hanover, Schwitters's birthplace, and home at Waldhausenstrasse 5 influenced and supported his artistic development and concerns. "My fatherland, Waldhausenstrasse" (Webster 231), is how he described it in an earlier draft of an essay published in 1930, and as such evidences the extreme attachment and love he felt towards Hanover and his family house, to the extent of localizing his patriotism not to Germany, or Weimar, or the world, but within the confines of his own home. As it applies to the *Merzbau*, it is within this house that the work was created and from which it drew strength and life, and it is thus an inseparable element of the work. We will have recourse to the importance of his life in Hanover and the complexities to the work which develop through its insertion into the bourgeois domestic space, but for now it is best to simply introduce the importance of this fact as we progress into the reconstruction of the work itself.

Merz: 1919-1924

The year 1919 represents a dramatic turning point in Schwitters's art, as it is the point at which his career as an artist is launched: he secured his first major exhibition in Herwarth Walden's *Sturm* gallery in Berlin, the principal gallery space for new German art. It is in response to the critics' reaction to this exhibition that he invents Merz, first as a way of advertising and differentiating his art, but it rapidly becomes the guiding principle behind his art. The story goes roughly this way: in 1918, Schwitters was making a series of abstract water colors, to one of which he attached a fragment of the word *Kommerzbank*–the four letters "merz." After said negative reception by the Berlin art critics, he published his defense, "Merz painting," in the *Sturm* journal, effectively proclaiming himself a Merz artist. In the following year he published a follow-up essay simply entitled "Merz," and it is to these two articles that I would like to position the groundwork for an understanding of what Merz art meant for Schwitters in its infancy.

He writes, "In effect, the word Merz signifies the assembly towards artistic ends of every material imaginable and, in principal, the equality of each of these materials on the work's organization" (Schwitters 7), anticipating the sudden expansion into abstract collage of found objects his work would soon experience. These *assemblages* are directed by a few rather interesting principles, the first being the equality of materials: this is, of course, a direct confrontation with the prevailing and stale attachment of the traditional art world to oil painting. But it could in fact be said that Merz is revolutionary twice over, as not only

does it reject or diminish the importance of oil painting, it simultaneously raises to the realm of art scraps of paper, discarded industrial goods, minerals, organic waste, and the nails and glue used to stick them all together. This should be firmly contrasted with the Dadaists' collage practices, at least in intention, as their practice was motivated towards the creation of non-art, anti-art, while Schwitters's art was motivated towards the creation of pure art. As Deitrich characterizes the importance of this equality, "His is an inherently democratic process" (Deitrich 12) (again to be contrasted with the Dadaists, who, in the case of Grosz and Heartfield, made explicitly communistic art) because it signals the destruction of the hierarchy of high and low art and its replacement with a principle of artistic equality.

This equality of materials is further emphasized by an equality and unification of artistic genres in the "total Merz work of art" (Schwitters 18), which is primarily identified in terms of theater. This is not necessarily a new concept, considering the precedent of Wagner, but there is nevertheless a novelty in his approach:

> In short, use everything . . . and always in consideration of the proportions demanded by the work.
>
> Even individuals can be used.
>
> Even individuals can be attached to the decor.
>
> Even individuals can enter the stage, even in their usual position, on two legs, speaking even in comprehensible language. (Schwitters 20)

In short, it is not only objects and artistic practices but also people that are treated as equal materials.

The essential corollary to the equality of materials is Schwitters's belief in fixed expression, which he phrases this way:

> Each line, each color, each form has a fixed expression. Each combination of line, color, and form has a fixed expression. This expression depends on a specific composition, and cannot be translated. Words cannot grasp the expression of a painting, just as one cannot paint the expression of a word, like the word "and" for example.

The choice of material then, or the choice of genre, implies a choice of expression which cannot be translated into any other material or genre and is specific to it. That is to say, that the choice of *assemblage* for Schwitters meant the creation of an artistic practice that seeks to bridge or overcome the separation and mutual exclusivity of individual forms and practices from one another by creating a space in which each expression is chosen for its particular method of communication, "an immediate expression through the reduction of the distance between the intuition and visualization of the work of art" (Schwitters 7). Paint,

shoe laces, newsprint, glass, poetry, sculpture–each provides a specific way and content of expression, which the *assembleur* contrasts and combines with other materials to create a work that contains multiple ways and contents of expression.

There is a final consideration for getting our understanding of Merz art on a solid footing, and that is the inherent fluidity of its definition. As he writes,

> The word "Merz," at the time in which I formed it, had no meaning. It has henceforth the meaning that I give to it as I go along. The meaning of the concept "Merz" is modified according to the experiences and conscience of those who work continually in the sense of that concept. (Schwitters 15)

Merz is thus by definition undefined, as its meaning depends entirely on the way it is used by the people employing it. This means, essentially, that the meaning of Merz depends on the use Schwitters puts it to, and is perhaps only a convenient slogan or advertising device for the individuation of his personal aesthetic. It is, however, much more helpful to see Merz as a perspective on art making that allows for a fluid interpretation of the meaning of art, artist, and work. In this way, we are able to see the use of "every material imaginable" as an experimentation with the boundaries of art, and the calling into question the validity of those boundaries. The total Merz work of art acts as the guarantor of the disintegration and nullification of these boundaries.

The birth of Merz in 1919 is significant for a second reason, and that is its concurrence with the establishment of the Weimar Republic in August of that year: Merz as a democratic art is founded in the political climate that sees the introduction of democracy to Germany. But there is a problematic element here, which is that the experimental nature of Schwitters's art found a parallel in the stuttering first steps of the fledgling Weimar Republic. The ensuing social turmoil caused both by Germany's defeat in World War I and the punitive Versailles Treaty, the removal of Wilhelm II from the throne, and news of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 planted the seeds of, as Deitrich characterizes the Weimar Republic, "a chronic, deep-rooted conflict" (Deitrich 15). In the vacuum left by the disintegration of the monarchy, Germany saw the materialization of a strong revolutionary movement spearheaded by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht that, with the example of the Bolshevik success in Russia (or at least what they thought was a success) of creating a communist government, sought to do the same in Germany. The months following Germany's defeat saw the proclamation of two separate governments, one under the leadership of the Social Demo-

cratic Party, and the second proclaimed by Liebknecht, which culminated in the general strike known as the Spartacist Uprising in January. Though it is unlikely that Schwitters himself had any serious interest in the revolution, the sudden formation of a number of artists' groups, such as the *Novembergruppe*, indicates an artistic commitment to revolutionary aims: "By evoking the goals of the November revolts, they all define themselves as revolutionary in intent" (Deitrich 20). The first months of the Republic's existence evidenced growing social violence, the escalation of which led the Socialist leaders to employ the nationalist and right-wing organization of *Friekorps* soldiers to put down the incipient revolution, leading to the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in early 1919 and the dissolving of the revolution. With this Germany achieved the restoration of a tense but operable social order, tainted, as it would only later become clear to what extent and purpose, by a reliance on the political right and their street fighters.

As the years went on, poverty in Germany accelerated to create the all too familiar crisis of mass unemployment and hyperinflation in effect by 1923. With the mark valued at 4.3 trillion to the dollar, the possibility of fine art in Germany would at first appear absurd if not outright laughable. But the European avant-garde–many of whom were working and living in Germany–were especially active at the time. As a story about Schwitters reveals, the possibility of art in an impoverished country was dependent on the principles he adopted with Merz: "'We had no money to buy paints and canvas.' And so, explained Moholy, Kurt persuaded him to use banknotes instead of paint" (Webster 144). Schwitters himself explained it this way:

> Out of parsimony I took whatever I found to do this, because we were now an impoverished country. One can even shout with refuse, and this is what I did, nailing and gluing it together. I called it "Merz." (Deitrich 6)

We should thus see an intimate relationship between the social and political developments in Weimar Germany following the end of World War I and Schwitters's artistic development, in which the principles of Merz not only enabled him to continue making art, but arose as a response to the prevailing social conditions by introducing found objects–discarded, unwanted, useless objects–into his art.

There are then three important pieces from this period that foreshadow the beginning of his work on the *Merzbau*. The first of which, his 1920 *Haus Merz*, is an assemblage of toys, gears, strips of metal and wood, a button, all of which mounted on a wood plank, depicting what can only be a church. A steeple on

the right is counterpoised to an interior that is dominated by intertwining gears. The connection of Merz with religion is not incidental, but, as Deitrich writes, "The house of God . . . has been transformed into a house for Merz. Thus Merz is declared a new religion" (Deitrich 170). The gears characterize either the impossibility of worship within the *Haus Merz*, as Gamard suggests, or, conversely, the worshipers as being mechanical themselves. This second possibility would seem to implicate a mechanized humanity for Merz and Schwitters; there is, however, a more compelling interpretation: for Schwitters, the mechanical was the human, and the human was material. He writes in 1921 that "I discovered my love for the wheel and recognized that machines are abstractions of the human spirit" (Dietrich 86). A modern *Merzreligion* finds its expression in Schwitters' use of the signifying power of the material, the machine, as an abstraction of the human being, and indicates reciprocally a divine existence of material.

A second work is *Heilige Bekümmernis* (ca. 1920, alternately translated as Holy Affliction (Deitrich), Saint Uncumber (Webster), and, to add to the confusion somewhat, affectionately referred to by Hans Richter as "Kurt Schwitter's Christmas Tree"), whose principal components are a mannequin he likely acquired from his parents' clothing store, a red light and a Christmas ornament that has replaced the head and arm, respectively, and a music box that played "Come Ye Children." The sculpture takes its name from a fifteenth-century saint who prayed to be disfigured to avoid marriage, and subsequently grew a beard. "The sculpture clearly evokes," writes Deitrich, "the then common sight of a war cripple engaged in small-scale street commerce" (Deitrich 172), which, together with the image of the disfigured saint, brings to mind the dual image of the canonization and prostitution of the war-veteran. This bifurcation makes for the uneasy assessment that the work is an allegory for the objectification of the war-veteran as an eroticized object, but one which is "no longer capable of quenching desire" (Deitrich 174) or achieving its own satisfaction. The multiple references to Christmas suggest a yearning for tradition within the fragmented and disfigured present, while simultaneously calling into question that tradition as farcical and, conversely, posing the present as intercessory.

The third, the *Merzsäule*, or *Merz-column* of 1923, is essentially the foundation of the Merzbau, and acted as the base of the *KdeE*. Composed of "the debris of materialist society seemingly heaped at random upon each other" (Deitrich 176), the combination of children's toys, newsprint, photographs, wood and

metal scraps, dried flowers, an animal's horn, plaster casts, and a doll's head affixed to the top, creates an overwhelming sense of order through chaos. A collage affixed to the base suggests, for Gamard, "symbolic references that point to mystical aspects of Christianity" (Gamard 91) in the figures of the Madonna and Child and their attendants, and indicates therefore a foundation in spirituality. The work is an example of the reorganization of the material society in which the spiritual principles of art-making predominate. Essential to understanding the *Merzsäule* is the head that crowns the work, because it is in reality not a mannequin but the death mask of Schwitters' second son. The inclusion of his son's death mask (in an earlier version, it was a bust of his wife thought to be titled *Suffering*) encourages two complementary perspectives: first, that the work functions autobiographically, as though being an objectivation of Schwitters' sense of loss and attempts to come to terms with his own grief; and secondly, as a reflection on the fragility of life and the hope for spiritual redemption. The work moreover can be seen as a materialization of Schwitters' attempts to remember and give form to the past.

As for how these works prefigure the *Merzbau*, the *Haus Merz* functions as "my first Merz architecture" (Schwitters 18) and should thus be seen as his first attempt at creating an architecture through assembly, while the second and third works were incorporated into the overall construction of the *Merzbau* at one point or another, and function therefore as complex fragments within a larger whole of further fragments. The invocation of saints, the Madonna, the church in these three works, leads to the easy characterization of Schwitters's artistic goal as a transcendent one, wherein the common and disposable materials of industrial capitalism are recovered by the artist, given form, and thereby spiritualized. This transformation of the fragmented dross of material society within the work of art, in these first and, essentially, originary sculptures leading to the *Merzbau*, repeats itself in the larger whole by both synecdoche–the second and third are subsumed and can thus stand as miniatures–and by continued practice, as the use of found objects remained an important dimension of his later work. The temporal dualism, of the breaking through of the past through the individual histories of each object and their subjugation to a present and formalized whole, retains its importance and, as we will see, takes on even greater importance as the work's foundations are covered over and buried within its core. Moreover, as core both *Heilige Bekümmernis* and the *Mer*

zsäule must be seen as shaping the significance of the larger work in their temporal precedence as well as spatial interiority.

KdeE: 1924-1933

Sometime around 1924, Schwitters placed the *Merzsäule* within his studio and began a kind of personal exploration of sculpture and architecture. What he eventually called the *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends*, or Cathedral of Erotic Misery, began as a very private, personal attempt to work through his relation to eroticism, to his friends, and to the world, and remained a secretive and poorly known piece until 1931– the year of the printing of *Merz* 21, wherein Schwitters included a substantial description of the work. His Merz practice remained much the same as ever, but his growing fame as a cabaret artist, the need to organize, fund, and print his *Merz* magazine, and the opening of his advertising agency, Merz Werbezentrale, led to Schwitters having to divide his time between a number of money-making endeavors, as, even though the German economy began to stabilize after 1924, it was still a difficult place to make a living–as an abstract artist especially so. The 1920's, then, were a period of both extreme energy and productivity in a wide variety of fields for Schwitters, including the 1923 Holland Dada tour with Theo Van Doesburg and subsequent reading tours around Europe, trips to see friends, the modernization of the Hanover City Council's printing matter awarded to the Merz Werbezentrale in 1929, and the continued production and exhibition of abstract Merz pictures, landscapes and portraits, poetry, stories, and plays. It should indeed be surprising to think that with everything he busied himself with at the time he should have any left over to devote to his *Kathedrale*. Nevertheless, it seems he made every effort to work on it, day or night, to the point of devising a way of hammering in nails in the middle of the night.

Of the sparse accounts of the work–mostly from a few close friends he would permit to see the work, considering its essentially private nature and the fact that it was far from being finished–there are a few that are worth considering as they offer at least a basic chronology of the piece. When Hans Richter saw it in 1925, he remarked that it "was a living, daily-changing document on Schwitters and his friends" (Richter 152). He is making reference, most likely, to the fact that around 1924 the *Merzsäule* began to accumulate what Schwitters referred to as grottoes, or small pockets or holes in the overall sculpture, that

contained possessions of his friends, possessions in many cases stolen from their owners. These friendship grottoes accounted for many of his artistic and personal relations, including, of course, ones for his wife and son, and by the end of the decade had convinced Schwitters to simply ask for donations to the work:

> . . . it had become a truly democratic work in which contributions from others were not only welcomed but encouraged. [El] Lissitsky provided a small cage structure, [Herwarth] Walden, [Hans] Arp, [Laszlo] Moholy, [Raoul] Hausmann, [Naum] Gabo and [Theo Van] Doesburg added their own grottoes and Hannah Höch was given the rare privilege of being allowed to design two. (Webster 222)

This list should give some inkling of the personal connection Schwitters had with the European avant-garde at the time, all of which were not only professional relations but close friends as well. When Richter saw the structure again three years later, he recounted:

> All the little holes and concavities that we had formerly 'occupied' were no longer to be seen. "They are all deep down inside," Schwitters explained. They were concealed by the monstrous growth of the column, covered by other sculptural excrescences, new people, new shapes, colours and details. A proliferation that never ceased. (Richter 152-53)

We should see this expansion outward, with its concurrent burying of previous layers, not as those layers sinking into an oblivion, but as essential parts of the work, if not in fact as its internal organs. Thus, when his friends' grottoes have become fully subsumed by the later additions, just as the *Merzsäule* itself would become, they offer themselves as remembered foundations, invisible, yes, but life-giving.

Rudolf Jahns, following a visit in 1927, offered another account of the work that emphasizes a spiritual calm and stillness within Schwitters's studio, the heart of the *KdeE*, as well as mentioning the presence of a jar of Schwitters's urine that held immortelles. Finally, following his conviction that the piece was finished–evidenced by the fact that he was in contact with Katherine Dreier of the Société Anonyme about exhibiting it, and had made several photographs of the piece in 1930–Schwitters published his only public statement about the *KdeE* in the 1931 issue of *Merz*. I quote a substantial portion of the piece here because it is, of course, significant as coming from the artist himself, but more importantly because it powerfully evokes the "literary content" of the work's grottoes:

> As the structure grows bigger and bigger, valleys, hollows, caves appear, and these lead a life of their own within the overall structure . . . Each grotto takes its character from some principal components. There is the Nibelungen Hoard with the glittering treasure; the Kyffhäuser with the stone table; the Goethe Grotto with one of Goethe's legs as a relic and a lot of pencils worn down to stubs; the submerged personal-union city of Braunshweig-Lüneburg with houses from Weimar of Karlsruhe, the Sex-Crime Cavern with an abominably mutilated corpse of an unfortunate young girl, painted tomato-red, and splendid votive offerings; the Ruhr district with authentic brown coal

> and authentic gas coke; an art exhibition with paintings and sculptures by Michelangelo and myself being viewed by a dog on a leash; the dog kennel with lavatory and a red dog; the organ, which you turn anti-clockwise to play 'Silent Night, Holy Night' and 'Come Ye Little Children'; the 10% disabled war veteran with his daughter, who no longer has a head but keeps himself well, the Monna Hausmann consisting of a reproduction of the Mona Lisa with the pasted-on face of Raoul Hausmann covering over the 3-legged lady made by Hannah Höch; and the great Grotto of Love.
>
> The Love Grotto takes up approximately 9 1/4 [sic.] of the base of the column; a wide outside stair leads to it, underneath which stands the Female Lavatory Attendant of Life in a long narrow corridor with scattered camel dung. Two children greet us and step into life; owing to damage, only part of a mother and child remain. Shiny and broken objects set the mood. In the middle a couple is embracing: he has no head, she no arms; between his legs he is holding a huge blank cartridge. The big twisted-around child's head with syphilitic eyes is warning the embracing couple to be careful. This is disturbing, but there is reassurance in the little bottle of my own urine in which immortelles are suspended. I have recounted only a tiny part of the literary content of the column. Besides, many grottoes have vanished from sight under later additions, for example, Luther's Corner. (*Kurt Schwitters: Merz–a Total Vision of the World* 58)

In addition to the grottoes devoted to his friends and family, then, a number of other themes emerge in this description of the "literary content" of the *KdeE*. A number are devoted to German cultural history, such as the Kyffhäusen and Goethe grottoes; some are commenting on contemporary life, as in the 10% disabled war veteran; and finally there is an overwhelming concentration on a disturbed erotics. Disfigured people, most in intimate relations with one another, sex-crime victims and syphilitic children, stare out at the viewer as so much collected debris, so much discarded fragment of industrial society. The conglomeration of these multiple themes indicates a profound linkage between the erotic, the disfigured, the personal, and the traditional, instigating either the massive equating of each with the other (i.e. the personal and traditional as disfigured, the disfigured as erotic, etc.) or, just as likely, the cohabitation of separate realms of human experience that, while disturbing, are nonetheless subdued by the calming effect of the artist's addition of his own waste to the work. This addition allows for the conclusion that the subject can overcome the fragmentary world through its organization and subjugation to artistic form.

And though the center chamber of the *KdeE* might suggest, with its still and contemplative inwardness, that the work was merely a moving inward for Schwitters to come to an understanding of himself, the work's constant expansion outward belies this inwardness with a determined movement into unused space. As objects became subsumed beneath future layers plastered onto the surface, so too the inner space of the work became further and further sublimated into the whole. The movement outward, both physically and in the incorporation of references to historical and contemporary events, and of course in the grottoes to

his friends, suggests that the piece was not only Schwitters' attempt to understand or reclaim himself, but also to understand and reclaim the world at large. Though an essential aspect of the work, the disappearance of objects within it suggests that the past, and man's interior life, are always being covered over by the surface of the present, and what was once lived experience, objects that were once visible, can only perpetuate themselves through the internal process of remembrance.

These grottoes, moreover, act as fetishes or shrines, as Dietrich and Gamard position them respectively, such that the objects stand in for their owners as a kind of calling forth of their spiritual presence. This presence takes the form, both of the person themselves, but more importantly as a reflection of Schwitters's relationship with them. This spiritual presence is perhaps best understood in terms of a materialization of Schwitters's memory of these individuals, much as his son's death mask functioned within the *Merzsäule*. It should be noted here that Schwitters is attempting to include more than his own artistic production into the *KdeE*, that he is in fact searching for the creation of a kind of artistic community to be expressed within the work through the fragment. The fragment here takes a direct connection to the individual, insofar as the friendship grottoes signify and stand in for specific individuals, which evidences not only a collection and transformation of objects within the *KdeE*, but of people as well.

But the world had since become a dangerous place. The relative stability of Weimar Germany came to an abrupt end in 1929, precipitated by the drying up of foreign capital after the stock market crash. In the ensuing years, massive unemployment (5.5 million in 1931) and concerns about how to fix the spiraling economic depression fueled the rapid radicalization of the political body towards the communist and national socialist parties, on the left and right respectively. Growing social unrest took the form of an increase in street fighting, and found its fruition in the majority of the Reichstag being composed of representatives of radical parties seeking the overthrow of the government. And in 1933, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party accomplished the overthrow of the democratic Weimar government, setting themselves up as the absolute authority not only over German political decisions, but increasingly, over cultural policies and artistic practices.

Merzbau: 1933-1937

Documentation on the work is severely lacking after 1933, due in large part to the political climate: his normally voluminous correspondence with friends became scant, and he found it harder and harder to exhibit, perform, or publish his magazine. As such, it will become necessary to situate the piece more and more in terms of Schwitters's life and times. It is within this political climate that Schwitters changed, as reflected in a letter written by his wife in 1933, the title of the *KdeE* to the *Merzbau*. This renaming signals several things: first, that though he saw in 1931 his work as complete, he knew that it had since become impossible to exhibit it, and responded by trying to think of how his work could be further expanded; second, that he had given up his overtly private attempts to deal with his "erotic misery" and became more interested in pure construction; and third, that his blossoming career as an artist and poet had suddenly come to a public end, and he needed a way to funnel his creative energies into something besides his Merz pictures and poems, which he was also unable to exhibit. The first and third are, essentially, related to one another and to Hitler's ascent to power, as art in Germany became increasingly under Nazi control. What was not condoned as hygienic, German art, was systematically marginalized–that is, anything that would now be considered the avant-garde, along with Schwitters's works, were not only denied exhibition space, but their creators were similarly persecuted. It is indicative of the prevailing mood that not only did Schwitters undertake the immense task of committing his entire literary *oeuvre* to memory, but he also whitewashed the windows of his house from the inside. Each of these manifests the extent to which he felt threatened by the changing political circumstances, and reflect an increasing movement inwards in his artistic practice, for he could not allow his works to fall into unfriendly hands, as any discovery could potentially send him to prison. He was, moreover, in contact with a number of people about the possibility of his emigration to the United States, but there were several important considerations that delayed this process until it would no longer be possible: he was hesitant to leave Hanover, and the house he had lived in for most of his life (nearly 40 years in 1933); moreover, he did not want to abandon what he considered his life's work, the *Merzbau*, to be found and destroyed by the Nazis in his absence; and finally, it is likely he simply did not want to face the reality of the situation. As well, he felt more and more cut off from the circle of avant-garde artists he had collaborated with and drew strength from in the 20's, most of whom had since either emigrated,

went into hiding (as per Hannah Höch), or, as in the case of Doesburg, died in 1931 of a heart attack.

All these developments, however, propelled Schwitters to undertake the construction of the *Merzbau* in a more purposeful and concentrated manner, and the project underwent a dramatic expansion over the next three years. Whereas the single room of his studio had been sufficient for the *KdeE*, the work eventually expanded out into 8 of the house's rooms, up into the attic, and down into the foundation, as much to say that "the *Merzbau* . . . did in fact stretch, after thirteen years of building, from the subterranean to the sky" (Gamard 94-95). It should be seen as an ironic twist of fate–leaning heavily towards the tragic and absurd–that the majority of the *Merzbau* was built not only during, but in many ways directly caused by, the rise of the Third Reich and its oppressive cultural policies, such to say that the growing confinement of and discrimination against abstract artists led Schwitters to, in a sense, try and free himself from that confinement by turning his home into a piece of abstract art itself. It is ironic, of course, because the Nazis would have never tolerated such a work or its artist had it been discovered, and tragic because it could never be shown: "I can't show my studio to anyone of course . . . It saddens me so" (Webster 270). It is, moreover, a testament to the limited information we have on the work that the only surviving photographs, aside from a few taken in 1932, are from 1930, six years before he stopped working on it.

As 1937 approached, the authorities interested themselves more and more with the goings-on of the Schwitters household, in this case not only due to his affiliation with Dada and abstract art but also because of his son Ernst's growingly vocal disdain for the *Hitlerjugend*. Towards the end of 1936, it became increasingly dangerous for either him or his son to remain in Germany, and so in January of the following year he emigrated to Norway, leaving his wife Helma to look after numerous paintings and collages, his mother who was still living at Waldhausenstrasse 5, and, of course, his precious *Merzbau*. Gwendolyn Webster characterizes these final days this way:

> Before leaving Kurt spent two days photographing the Merzbau [work which has been lost] with Ernst and in the process took a fresh and objective look at his precious work. The Merzbau, which he liked to keep abreast of the times, had been neglected recently. As he gazed around, he saw that there was still plenty to work on. But there was no time now. (Webster 276)

This was especially true, as only six months later the infamous *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition would open in Munich, containing, as it did, four of Schwitters's pieces.

Exile and Ruins: 1937-

The following years proved very trying ones for the Schwitters. Helma spent most of the time in Hanover protecting Kurt and his *Merzbau* from Gestapo inquiries into his whereabouts, taking care of his mother, the house, and the numerous animals they kept. She was, in effect, the work's guardian, and had, following Kurt's emigration, blockaded the door into the *Merzbau*. Kurt and his son spent their time living in a small fishing hut outside Oslo, where Schwitters began work on a new transportable Merzbau, the *Haus am Bakken*, or House on the Hill. He also attempted to renew contact with his friends outside Germany regarding possibilities for exhibiting his work and, with Katherine Dreier, his chances of securing emigration to the United States. He remained hopeful, writing to Dreier that "I am building a new studio as a visible sign that a new life is beginning for me . . . It has to begin, I'm only fifty years old, one can begin again at that age. In all, life is so cruel that one shouldn't have been born. With this premise one can live extremely well" (Webster 284). The authorities in Norway had recently become distrustful of German nationals, and, coupled with his hesitant and passive attitude to the entire emigration process, together combined to delay the processing of his emigration papers.

The question would soon become a moot one, however, as he was forced to flee Norway in 1940 as the *Wehrmacht* invaded and occupied Norway. Once again compelled to abandon his Merz building, Schwitters was at least able to secure transportation to Great Britain on a fishing boat. He spent the next year in an internment camp on the Isle of Man making sculptures out of porridge, painting portraits of the British officers, and attempting to find news of his wife before being released in November 1941. He took up residence in London and, to pay for rent and food, worked furiously on portrait commissions. Communications with his wife were extremely limited due to the fact that their letters now had to go through the intermediary of a friend in neutral Switzerland, and were under scrutiny by the censors in Germany.

This complicated and somewhat unreliable method led to Schwitters learning almost simultaneously in 1944 of both his wife's death from cancer and the destruction of Waldhausenstrasse 5, and, along with it, the Hanover *Merzbau*. "His immediate reaction was one of numbed calm", writes Webster.

> Though so far away from Helma, he wrote back to Hagenbach, he had been so close to her that he had known instinctively that she was no longer alive . . . As for the Merzbau, well, it was dead and gone, like the era it had stood for: so what? 'It is sad of course, but more for others than for myself.'

> It was the reaction of one under severe shock. Losses such as these were too much to grasp. (Webster 349)

Everything, in fact, was unraveling in Schwitters's life: he could not visit his friends in Europe because he would first need to get British citizenship; relatively few galleries in London would exhibit his *assemblages* nor could he paint landscapes and portraits according to the British taste; and, what is more, life in exile had taken its toll on his health: he suffered a stroke in April, and was having difficulty recovering from it. Such to say that it is no short of a miracle he did not, upon hearing the news of his wife's death and the destruction of his life's work, die himself.

The majority of the work was destroyed in an air raid, October 1943, and, what with Schwitters inability to return to Hanover due to British visa regulations, his declining health, and his growing conviction that he could no longer think of Germany as his homeland, he would never return to Hanover to witness for himself the extent of the damage. And though he "was now willing Waldhausenstrasse into existence with all his might" (368), both on account of his personal desire to save anything at all of the *Merzbau*, as much as because the Museum of Modern Art in New York had offered a substantial grant to rebuild it, it had since become a lost cause. As a close friend wrote to him in 1947 in response to his worries over it, "there is nothing left to save of your Merzbau, not even ruins" (Webster 371), as what had not been destroyed in the bombing had been left exposed to the elements for four years.

The war had since ended, and, politically, historically, it would be the Allies proclaimed the victors. Nevertheless, it was a hollow victory, as

> From Kurt's standpoint . . . he considered what he called the trinity of destruction–Hitler, Goering and Goebbels–as the true victors, not militarily but in the sense that they had destroyed a great European renaissance, an avant-garde 'with a function, a unity and a vital core'. (Webster 382)

He had not, of course, been the only victim of the Third Reich, and here he gives recognition to the dozens of other artists–not to mention the millions of private citizens–who had been forced into exile or imprisoned before and during the war, their works smashed, cut, burned, destroyed, as much as to say, their lives as well. He was himself a casualty of the war, just as much as his beloved *Merzbau* or any combatant, prisoner of war, or oppressed populace.

He spent the last years of his life in Ambleside, Great Britain, painting portraits and working on yet

another Merz building, the Merz Barn, with Harry Pierce. His health had at this point begun to rapidly deteriorate, and he died in 1948. As for the *Haus am Bakken*, it also was destroyed, but by children playing with matches in 1951. The scant amount of work he was able to do on the Merz Barn, a single unfinished wall, was moved to the University of Newcastle. Finally, in 1981-83 a reconstruction of one of the rooms of the Hanover *Merzbau* was completed with help from Ernst, and exists in the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, though "visitors are liable to be disappointed by the replica . . . There is no life, no struggle, no sense of continuity . . . It is of historical interest, but remains a mere fossil, for the grottoes are empty" (Webster 399).

Remembrance

It is at this point that I would like to tie some loose ends, retrace my steps, and offer a few more remarks about the work itself that would have been difficult to insert earlier on. These are not, however, small or unimportant errata, but have been left until now in order to lay a kind of foundation for the theoretical project that will soon follow. It may seem that there is little to say about the work after 1933, given the relative brevity afforded to its discussion in contrast to the more sustained interest in the political climate and his personal movement through it. To an extent, this is true, if only because the documentation of the work from this time is very limited. But the reason for this is that in all likelihood Schwitters once more altered the aim of his work, this time returning to a similar approach as he had had in 1924, that is, an increasingly private exploration of his place in the world. Just as he had been hesitant to reveal the *KdeE* publicly until he was fairly confident it had been finished, and, what goes hand in hand, that it was something that he could see as being exhibited, it is altogether likely that he began to see the *Merzbau* as "Unfinished out of principle" (Deitrich 166) and, therefore, not yet ready to be properly documented. The photographs taken before his exile attest to this fact, as they were taken not out of a sense of security in the work's completion, but out of a desire to save what could be saved. It can only be assumed that the dynamism that had always been present in the work was then being taken to its logical extreme, and necessitated the daily, if not minutely, adjustment of its pieces and their relations to one another, much like the problem of Borges's Funes who cannot comprehend having the same word for a dog seen from the front as from the side. It remains a speculative assertion, but if it was in fact Schwitters's intention to create " a living, daily-changing document" as was Richter's assessment 10 years prior, then the ultimate result of such a project is one that could, in principle, never be finished, one that would require the perpetual reorganization of and addition

to its materials in order to reflect the changing climate of the world and, moreover, of Schwitters himself.

Along these lines, we can see Schwitters as the artist and creator of the *Merzbau*, but it is much more fruitful to see him as its principal subject and material. As the Total-Merz-Work-of-Art, it would be only natural to include the creator within the work itself, especially considering its location within his family home. The found materials pasted to the walls, the plaster and paint and nails, were of course an important component of the work, but in theater-like fashion, him, his wife, his son, their numerous mice, guinea pigs and other animals–even Schwitters's relatively few visitors during this time–all became actors on his Merz stage. When seen this way, the work suddenly transforms again, from collage, to sculpture, to column, to architecture, and finally, to theater. After each successive transformation of genre, the work lifts itself out of its predecessor and simultaneously denies it: a collage is too flat, a sculpture too individual; a column is fine if it is supporting something, but absurd any other way; a house is beautiful, perhaps, but needs the presence of human subjects; finally, it becomes theater, where everything imaginable comes into place as artistic material.

If there is a fruitful way of seeing the culmination of the *Merzbau*'s over thirteen years of construction, then it is, as was his motivation in 1920, as theater. The assembly of all materials for artistic means, which, for Kurt, meant principally the assembly of all *discarded* materials, plastered and painted over, finds its expression in the assembly also of discarded human beings, the cultural waste of an oppressive society. As Germany became more and more totalitarian, the Schwitters responded by living their lives in the milieu of an ever-changing, ever-expanding stage, concealed from the world but greater than it. Such to say, that any documentation of the work from its final years must ultimately be seen as trivial, not only because of the dynamism of its surface, but also because of the dynamism of its inhabitants and the world it peered out at as through a looking glass.

L'art pour l'art

The theoretical armature with which I am attempting an aesthetic rescue of the *Merzbau* must now be assembled. I would like to begin, then, by resurrecting some of the debate over the concept of the autonomy of art, specifically as it is taken up in the aesthetic philosophies of Walter Benjamin and Peter

Bürger, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. Each of these thinkers has, of course, their own concerns above and outside the question of art's autonomy from society, and many of the more important ideas I would like to draw into this project result from these further concerns. The autonomy of art, however, is a running current and foundational element for each of their individual critiques of art's function: it is the spine, the cornerstone, the heart that circulates the blood. This debate must, therefore, be given due attention, as everything necessarily follows from a clear understanding of their positions and rationale for those positions. In an effort to allow their positions to be developed as clearly as possible, I will refrain here from incorporating a sustained comparison to the *Merzbau*. I will, however, be sure to point to these comparisons where applicable.

I am interested in characterizing this debate here, then, primarily in terms of art's capacity to reject, abolish, and overcome Fascism, or what is equivalent, a totalizing and inherently unequal culture: as Benjamin is only too clear, his theory of reproducibility is governed by the credo of developing concepts "completely useless for the purposes of Fascism" (Benjamin "The work of art . . . " 218). The rejection of Fascism necessarily follows and is dependent on the conviction, held by each of these thinkers, that art is the method through which humanity can be liberated from oppression in anticipation of "a spirit that would only then step forth" (Adorno 29). The choice of Fascism has a second purpose, for it is through that lens that the *Merzbau* comes into existence and, moreover, at the hands of which is destroyed. There are two distinct sides to this debate, of which the first seeks to collapse the distance between art and social praxis–vis. Benjamin and Bürger–or in other words, to destroy art's autonomy in the creation of a socially useful and socially responsible art. The second position, conversely, sees "the political potential of art in art itself" (Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension*), problematic as art's autonomy must necessarily appear if art is taken to have a liberating function.

This liberation, influenced as it is by historical materialism, is an invocation of a specifically material one. Though their theories are fraught with parallels to spiritualism through their returns to ideas of redemption and reconciliation, the difference between their conception of a material liberation and a spiritual one is drawn clearly by Marcuse's denunciation of philosophy, writing:

> In view of the meager development of the productive forces in the ancient economy, it never oc-

> curred to philosophy that material practice could ever be fashioned in such a way that it would itself contain the space and time for happiness. (Marcuse *The Essential Marcuse* 208)

Adorno, much more the pessimist of the two, brings the same argument to bear against the modern world:

> This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia–that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise–converges with the possibility of total catastrophe. (Adorno 33)

In each case, the possibility of paradise, that is, a material order that could guarantee happiness, is frustrated by a problem in the prevailing world view and practice of capitalism, which creates the material conditions necessary for liberation while simultaneously disallowing its practice. Marcuse blames the humanism of bourgeois society:

> . . . the bourgeois liberation of the individual made possible a new happiness.
>
> But the universality of this happiness is immediately canceled, since the abstract equality of men realizes itself in capitalist production as concrete inequality. (Marcuse 209)

Adorno maintains as much, linking the dilemma to the unanimous appraisal of commodities through exchange value, which creates the illusion of equality (insofar as everything is given a comparable value in the market) and thus conceals the real inequality inherent in a universal system of value: it is a false equality because it equates the value of a machine with the value of a man's labor, the value of a woman and the clothes she wears. As I made such pains to express earlier, Merz art seeks to develop an aesthetic of equality through the incorporation of refuse and fragment, and should be understood in terms of this theoretical interest in equality.

Benjamin's theory of reproducibility is an attempt at overcoming the inherent inequality of capitalism–and its culmination in Fascism–by proposing a theory of art in which its experience is no longer dependent on an appreciation of a work's authority, or aura, but dependent on the possibility of its mass enjoyment. He is, of course, responding to the exploitation of the mass media by the Nazis, whose fulfillment is "The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees" (Benjamin "The work of art . . . " 241). The aura of the unique work of art culminates in the person of Hitler, who stands at an unapproachable distance demanding, by force of his authority, the conflation of uniqueness with unimpeachable power. In response, Benjamin appropriates photography and film as the weapons by which an aesthetic of authority can be fought by virtue of reproduction, enabling the satisfaction of "the

desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (223). By positing an experience of art as an experience of equality, ultimately what should develop is a "'sense of the universal equality of things'", one, moreover, "which has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (223). The denial of uniqueness afforded by reproduction is correlated to a denial of the inherent oppression of the "*Fuhrer* cult" and its necessary creation of hierarchical power structures, as much to say, that the perception of the equality of things finds expression in the development of a sense of the true equality of men. This is a true sense of equality because it does not universalize the way value is assigned, but rather that value as a universal drops out to be replaced by a perception of a whole permanently fragmented in its experience: the work of art is no longer experienced as a relation of authority, but as an experience of a singularity within the larger totality; or, that in the *Merzbau* the material dross of reproduced society is taken out of its economic context and transformed into an experience of an aesthetic singularity within the work.

He is thus committed to an idea of art's entrance into the social order rather than its separation from it, convinced that the principle of art's autonomy "culminates in one thing: war" (241). War is the fulfillment of an aesthetic of authority because it results in "the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (241) and, by extension, the aesthetisization of war: "Fascism . . . expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *'l'art pour l'art*'" (242). But I would caution us from taking his conclusion at face value: what is interesting about this connection for me is the inherently political value of art, as culminating in war, or in liberation. The exact mechanism can be disputed later.

Peter Bürger likewise posits, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, that art must find its way into the daily praxis of society. He claims this on the grounds that autonomous art is "the objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeois class" (Bürger 47); what this means for him is that, as only self-understanding, bourgeois art is incapable of affecting the way in which life is lived because it only maintains the ideological exigencies of bourgeois society. It would be unfair to autonomous art, within Bürger's understanding of it, to suggest that it does not function as a protest against a bad society, for art's separation from society neces-

sarily forms it as the body capable of critiquing society: its separation allows for art to objectively look at society, granting it a privileged perspective on society's inherent inequality. Autonomous art, however, "by realizing the image of a better order in fiction, which is semblance (Schein) only, . . . relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change" (58). That is, by projecting the positive values of the culture onto art, which is removed from society, those values are in turn also removed from society, and can therefore have no practical value in creating social change; or, as he expresses it, the function of art in bourgeois society is "the neutralization of critique" (13). The problem is perhaps best exemplified by his tacit accusation of historians and critics, who "Whether they want to or not . . . hold a position in the social disputes of their time. The perspective from which they view their subject is determined by the position they occupy among the social forces of the epoch" (Bürger 6): just as the historian and critic is essentially already caught within the net of social forces and must therefore stand in a critical relation to them from that inherent collusion, so must the artist create art in recognition of his social culpability.

The *telos* of avant-garde art, specifically Dada and Surrealist art for Bürger, is, in distinction to autonomous art, then, "the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art" (49). This is achievable for him principally through the artistic practice of montage, for in montage the division between art and fiction is broken down: the fragments of montage are "no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality" (78). Two important corollaries to Schwitters's work apply here: insofar as his is an art of fragments, it is also one in which the fragment is given a place within the praxis of his own daily life, incorporated into his home and workspace. Bürger writes elsewhere that "For avant-gardistes . . . material is just that, material . . . the avant-gardiste tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment" (70). The use of fragments severs them from an existing totalizing society and discovers a new use for them, that is, as art. By subjecting the fragments of society to the effects of a reorganization through aesthetic form, montage regains its ability to critique society because it signals, in effect, the transformation of society from its very base, its material, by questioning the universal values of that society, of which the *Merzbau* should be viewed as such a reorganization.

In an attempt to better characterize Bürger's claims, we will have to turn our attention to Herbert Marcuse's thoughts on art and culture, as a number of Bürger's principal claims draw on Marcuse's 1937

essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture." The self-understanding of the bourgeois class and the relegation of positive values to art are expressed by Marcuse in terms of the soul, which functions as the realm of transcendent unity and freedom within bourgeois culture. Composed of "the purposeless and beautiful" (Marcuse *The Essential Marcuse* 208), it finds its proper expression in art: "The unity represented by art," he goes on to say, "and the pure humanity of its persons are unreal; they are the counterimage of what occurs in social reality" (213). Soul is, therefore, the autonomous arm of society–expressed in art–for it acts as the repository for the humane ideals of bourgeois society and is their "only still immaculate guarantor" (218). This could be seen as positive, for it allows for "the critical and revolutionary force of the ideal" (213) to be perpetuated in society. The perpetuation of that ideal, however, and the perpetuation of the soul at large, serves only "to excuse the poverty, martyrdom, and bondage of the body [and] the ideological surrender of existence to the economy of capitalism" (218), because the separation of human values from daily life excuses the material order from incorporating and expressing them in the physical welfare of people. This thus allows only for the perpetuation of inequality and oppression for Marcuse, as he believes that "material practice could be fashioned in such a way that it would itself contain the space and time for happiness" (208), thus effectively aligning himself against autonomous art. Schwitters art could, I believe, be seen as an attempt at creating happiness through the material practice of art, in which the humane ideals of society are problematized by specific formal and material concerns in the *Merzbau*.

Marcuse complicates his thinking on the autonomy of art, however, in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, published in 1978. Here, it is principally because art is separated from the means-end rationality of capitalist society that it is able to provide an alternate reality. As he writes, "The autonomy of art contains the categorical imperative: 'things must change'" (*The Aesthetic Dimension* 13). But this should not be seen as an about-face for Marcuse, but rather as a continuation of his earlier thought through a different emphasis on how art functions in relation to society. The difference can be summarized as a change in the way in which art is autonomous. One could in fact see his claims in "The Affirmative Character of Culture" as suggesting that art, as the vestigial arm of bourgeois ideals, is in reality implicit in society and exists thus as a carefully prepared reservation within society for those ideals; when he claims, therefore, in *The Aesthetic Dimension* that the political potential of art is in art itself, we must see this as an affirmation of art's autonomy. The

Merzbau's inclusion in the home, as much as its inability to be exhibited, similarly forces the work outside of the means-end reality of capitalist society and implicates it as autonomous. This means for Marcuse principally a commitment to functionally autonomous art: not merely a counterimage, art's "critical political potential . . . asserts itself precisely in the sublimation of the social content. Two worlds collide . . . The right and wrong of individuals [in the work of art] confront social right and wrong" (27). This confrontation results in an estrangement from social reality, and is motivated against the catastrophe of the "reproduction and integration of that which is" (50)–or in other words, the material perpetuation of bourgeois life praxis. It is only through art's ability to provide an alternate reality that the given reality becomes farcical and problematic. The *Merzbau* is, I believe, such an alternate reality, pieced together from the remains of society and thrust back against it.

Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory* published posthumously in 1970, takes these lines of thinking on the autonomy of art to an extreme by effectively questioning the validity of art's right to exist. He dismisses the possibility of a socially engaged art out of hand, but is equally concerned about the possibility of autonomous art as well: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" (Adorno 1). He offers the wry ultimatum, "Either to leave art behind or to transform its concept" (61) in recognition, primarily, of the difficulty inherent in what he sees as the problematic attempt to rescue art from its exploitation by capitalist society. That is, the crisis facing art for Adorno is whether it can overcome its complete commodifacation without thereby dissolving its claims to legitimacy; each alternative seems, therefore, one which must be rejected.

His solution can best be characterized as one in which art must reject its own concept to survive, and yet, paradoxically, remain art: "doubtless artworks became artworks only by negating their origin" (3). The negation of origins is especially significant, as he sees the project of art as a liberating principle in which the oppressive elements and material inequality of reality are negated and thus transformed. The incorporation of found materials in Merz art is a negation of their origins as material, and through the application of aesthetic form, Schwitters imputes to them instead the spiritual qualities of art. The auto-negation of art propels Adorno's critique to adopt the negation of nature and of society into art as well, such that art functions primarily as a negative response. The negation of society by art can be compared to

the negation of society by utopia: each presents what is not, but "because the nonexistent appears it must indeed be possible" (82). The appearance of the nonexistent thus presages its coming, and, thus, the coming of utopia, if only through the extension of art's principal essence, that is, of showing the non-existent as possible and thereby becoming "qualitatively transformed epiphanies" (80).

Art, however, is in fact not a vision of utopia but "a form of reaction that anticipates the apocalypse" (85). But this anticipation functions as the way in which art can continue to critique society: "That art enunciates the disaster by identifying with it anticipates its enervation" (19); "Art is modern art," he continues, "through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent" (21). The incorporation of the reproduced material of capitalist production in the *Merzbau* is Schwitters's attempt at such a mimesis, through which he aligns his artistic practice with the alienated fragments of material society. By taking the apocalypse, the alienated and hardened into its own concept, art protests the bad order by rejecting the position that it should present itself as the privileged realm of the humane–for the world is no longer humane, but unequal and oppressive–and instead adopt the goal of forcing the confrontation with what is ugly and inhumane. This translates into an art that is cruel to the world that is–both the natural world as well as society–because it must present itself in opposition to "the arbitrariness of what simply exists" (5).

But this negation is ultimately problematic for art itself, for it threatens to be its death: insofar as art remains the negation of society, it begins to preclude its own possibility, for it thus severs its validity as critique. The *Merzbau* is, unfortunately, a prime example of what he means, as its spiritualization overcame the political climate while nevertheless refusing to integrate with it, thus effectively canceling its ability to critique Nazi Germany. Of the different fates that might await art for Adorno, the first is art's complete commodification and subsequent role of affirming the illusory equality of capitalism; secondly, in what perhaps amounts to the same problem, art will become completely spiritualized, leading to the abolishment of art's necessary connection to the world. The second possibility is certainly preferable:

> It has often been said . . . that in society as a whole it is art that should introduce chaos into order rather than the reverse. The chaotic aspects of qualitatively new art are opposed to order–the spirit of order–only at first glance. They are ciphers of a critique of a spurious second nature: Order is in truth this chaotic. The element of chaos and radical spiritualization converge in the rejection of sleekly polished images of life . . . (94-95)

The implication here that order is in truth chaotic seeks to question and ultimately reject a totalized and universalized world, that is, the world demanded by Fascism. He continues, however, by offering the main dilemma of spiritualized art:

> Yet however deep the compulsion may lie that art divest itself of every trace of being a show . . . art no longer exists when that element has been totally eradicated and yet it is unable to provide any protected arena for that element; . . . Whether the spiritualization of art is capable of this will decide if art survives or if Hegel's prophecy of the end of art will indeed be fulfilled, a prophecy that, in the world such as it has become, amounts to the thoughtless and–in the detestable sense–realistic confirmation and reproduction of what is. In this regard, the rescue of art is eminently political, but it is also as uncertain in itself as it is threatened by the course of the world. (95)

Art, then, for Adorno is caught between these two extremes, such that it must always be tainted by its other, by society and its attempts to commodify it, and its necessity–and perhaps impossibility–to become completely spiritualized: or, in other words, art is caught between being subsumed into the social order, on the one hand, and moving more and more towards autonomy.

The only real salvation for art against a dehumanizing world, however, remains as just that impossible necessity: for art to become "radically spiritualized" (92). Adorno contrasts the spiritual in art, identified by him as the *apparition*, with Benjamin's concept of the aura–or rather, he rejects Benjamin's claim that art can remain art without the aura, for the aura is "whatever goes beyond its factual givenness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art" (45). The *apparition*, then, is everything in the work of art that does not factually exist; but the nonexisting in art is dependent on the assemblage of "fragments of the existing" (83), which act not only to develop the spiritual in art but also to disturb the work's internal unity. The tendency of art to move simultaneously towards and away from unity inflicts a rupture within which the *apparition* appears, and within which the critical potential of art rests in its attempt to move towards a true equality. I would like to suggest in what is to come that the memory of the *Merzbau* is just this *apparition*: the breaking forth of that which does not exist.

Love/Death: Protest

Let us take seriously the problem of death, for we must make some allowance for it, and, moreover, enact a positive transformation of its sense if we are to rescue the *Merzbau*. For the work is, it cannot be argued against, essentially dead: the documentation cannot stand in for the work itself, it must be experienced

in the fullness of its presence. We must, therefore, effect a qualitative shift in our understanding of death, specifically as it applies to works of art, because our real work cannot begin otherwise. And this means that we must discover in the concept of death the perpetuation of the presence of the dead.

To take a first step, we should follow Adorno by interrogating the notion that art is everlasting. He convinces us that by imputing permanence to art is not only a false conception of what art is and must be, but that such a gesture is, moreover, a foolish and hurtful one committed by the work and its artist:

> Obviously the duration to which artworks aspire is modeled on fixed, inheritable possession; the spiritual should, like material, become property, an outrage ineluctably committed by spirit against itself. As soon as artworks make a fetish of their hope of duration, they begin to suffer from their sickness unto death: The veneer of inalienability that they draw over themselves at the same time suffocates them. (28)

No sooner has the work of art professed to be eternal does it succumb to death. He is correct to a certain extent, as it is true that artworks are inevitably perishable; but he has neglected to account for how the work of art attains its hoped for duration: Artworks endure because they continue to be taken up by society as art. By way of example, the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel are qualitatively different from how Michelangelo painted them, the effect of restorations to the work undertaken in the five centuries since. There is some controversy on the success of these restorations–notably the most recent one completed in 1999–but I would here simply like to suggest that the work suffers from perpetual decay–that it is, in short, always moving towards death–but it is the product of these restorations, and the critical re-examination they spawn, that the work continues to endure. The meaning of his assertion that the spiritual becomes property is, in effect, just this process of restoration I have described, with its attendant critical problems: it is, as Adorno writes, "an outrage ineluctably committed by spirit against itself"; but we should keep in mind, however, that art consists in just this movement, of the transformation of art's concept by negating that concept. It is likely in the spiritual becoming property that artworks have any hope of endurance at all, for "Through duration art protests against death" (27). In this protest death is inescapable, for "Artworks have no power over whether they endure" (27), but the protest is nevertheless significant because art thus aligns itself with the struggle against the death of the body and of the spirit inflicted by commodification. The tactic of implicating the spiritual as property is bound up with its desire to be transmissible, and through the fulfillment of that desire does the work of art endure. My project must thus be aligned with the

transformation of the *Merzbau* into a kind of spiritual property.

Benjamin offers us a second way of approaching the development of such a spiritual property in his essay "Unpacking My Library." He is principally concerned with validating the passion of collecting: "Every passion", he writes, "borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (Benjamin "Unpacking . . . " 60). He continues: "To renew the old world–that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things, and that is why the collector of old books is closer to the wellsprings of collecting than the acquirer of luxury additions" (61). The connection to Merz art should, I hope, appear obvious, that is, as an art of collecting. Schwitters's art is primarily a collection of the fragments and forgotten dross of material society in the attempt to give them new life through an aesthetic transformation, through which it follows that the characteristics Benjamin imputes to the collector of old books must find a place in the validation of Schwitters's artistic project. Memory, and its objectivation in, on the one hand, an old book, and, on the other, the *Merzbau*, must be seen as two sides of the same coin. Therefore, when Benjamin writes:

> . . . one of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned on the market place and bought it to give it its freedom . . . " (64)

we should see in Merz a similar liberating impulse in the use of the discarded and fragmented objects suffusing his architectural assemblage.

Benjamin is furthermore clear on the role of property in a collection, to which he ties the importance of its transmissibility:

> Actually, inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection. For a collector's attitude towards his possessions stems from an owner's feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility. (66)

This property is spiritualized in the sense that it is dependent on the accumulation of memories, of the accumulation of the lost to grant them their freedom, to which I reply that I see not only Schwitters's *Merzbau* as the spiritual property of its artist, but, essentially, myself as its heir: its transmissibility as a collection finds its expression in my current appropriation of it. Schwitters's Merz art, its philosophy, practice, and person, are the contents of my collection, such that I would ask you to look at the first half of this essay as

an objectivation of that collection. To return to the example of restoration, my project here is an attempt at the artistic restoration of the *Merzbau*, and is, consequently, a labor of love that protests against death.

But let us complicate our picture of death somewhat by looking at how Marcuse proposes death's own function of protest through love:

> The idea of love, however, requires that the individual overcome monadic isolation and find fulfillment through the surrender of individuality in the unconditional solidarity of two persons. In a society in which the conflict of interest is the *principium individuationis*, this complete surrender can appear in pure form only in death. For only death eliminates all of the external conditions that destroy permanent solidarity and in the struggle with which individuals wear themselves out. It appears not as the cessation of existence in nothingness, but rather as the only possible consummation of love and thus as its deepest significance. (Marcuse *The Essential Marcuse* 220)

Love and death here form a dyad of protest against the oppression of capitalism's *principium individuationis*, for they serve as the only means of escaping the inherent inequality and separation of individuals propagated by that system. Death and love are thus seen as liberating forces, insofar as they break down the boundaries between individuals. As he writes, "Death does not come from outside, but from love itself" (219): death is not, that is, inflicted on us by the world, but by our desire for the fulfillment of love. As such, I am not attempting to return the *Merzbau* to life, for that is beyond the power of anyone, and is necessarily a failed, useless gesture; rather, I am seeking to find, in the experience of the work *as dead*, a way in which that death can be a significant force for the protest against the ideological exigencies of Fascism, of a totalizing universe, through the rescue of the past in memory.

Pain, Sorrow, Guilt

We should not be misled in thinking that this memory is anything but painful: the relation one has to the dead is necessarily infected by feelings of sorrow and guilt, the guilt that what has been lost is in some way a reflection of our own impotence and failure. As Marcuse so eloquently writes on the relation of art to society:

> Dialectical logic may provide meaning and justification for these claims. They have their materialistic truth in Marx's analysis of the divergence of essence and appearance in capitalist society. But in the confrontation between art and reality they become mockery. Auschwitz and My Lai, the torture, starvation, and dying–is this entire world supposed to be "mere illusion" and "bitterer deception"? It remains rather the "bitterer" and all but unimaginable reality. Art draws away from this reality, because it cannot represent this suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form, and thereby to the

> mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment. Art is inexorably infested with this guilt. Yet this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it impossible. If even this memory were to be silenced, then the "end of art" would indeed have come. Authentic art preserves this memory in spite of and against Auschwitz; this memory is the ground in which art has always originated–this memory and the need to create images of the possible "other." (Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension* 56)

Art inexorably succumbs to the necessity of positing itself as the other to an oppressive reality, for without such a movement it becomes itself a force of that oppression; but it must come from a guilty conscious, a memory of pain that must at all costs be reconciled– but how? How can art, and its experience, result in the reconciliation of the individual to his past and to his failure? How is it at all possible for art to call into question, and qualitatively transform its experience, a past experienced as one of pain and anguish, suffering and inhumanity?

Memory as a regulative idea, memory as an aesthetic experience of the dead, acts positively in the salvaging of the past. To be sure, it is often expressed that humanity must work for a better future; but this desire conceals the tremendous labor still to be done: a liberated humanity cannot abolish its past, cannot propel itself into liberation, without first redeeming its past:

> In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (Benjamin "Theses on the Philosophy of History" 255)

The tradition of which Benjamin speaks is the universal, totalized tradition that enforces the perspective that the past acts as justification for the ruling powers of the present. These victors of history are necessarily complicit in the oppression of the revolutionary class, and any alignment with those victors on the part of the historian, or artist, is an affirmation of that oppression. We cannot look forever forward, as that is tantamount to forgetting the pain and sorrow which is our inheritance, for this forgetting is moreover the principle through which the inequality of society perpetuates itself.

The project of history, and, by extension, the aestheticization of memory, must thus be seen as a method for the redemption of the past. But the present always carries us forward, like Benjamin's angel of history who can only watch the catastrophe while being swept forever into the future:

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive

> a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (259)

To redeem the past, then, we must somehow be able to carry it with us, and this process is remembrance. Remembrance of the dead is their last remaining recourse to continued presence. Art is at once an objectivation of this memory, and, in the case of the *Merzbau*, its frustration. For we are ourselves caught in this storm, and cannot undo what has been done, nor can we experience that objectivation physically but, in all truth, only as a spiritual presence that must be invoked by proxy: we must set up the historical record of the work as an alternate to the work itself–as Benjamin's portrait photography stands in for the deceased–and probe its countenance for the breaking forth of spirit. In this way is the *Merzbau* dead, and in this way must we approach it if we are to approach it at all: as a remembrance of the dead.

I am convinced, however, that this experience is a liberating one, for it preserves the promise of liberation and happiness. "Only in memory and longing", writes Adorno, "not as a copy or as an immediate effect, is pleasure absorbed by art" (Adorno 14): memory–in spite of its pain, if not because of it–is thus bonded to pleasure, as much as to happiness and the perpetuation of joy. As Marcuse is only too clear:

> Forgetting past suffering and past joy alleviates life under a repressive reality principle. In contrast, remembrance spurs the drive for the conquest of suffering and the permanence of joy. But the force of remembrance is frustrated: joy itself is overshadowed by pain. Inexorably so? The horizon of history is still open. If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions. (Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension* 73)

I see in this the culmination of everything that has been said up till now: the method through which art can enter the struggle for liberation and equality, happiness and love, is through remembrance, for only remembrance confronts us with our pain. Forgetfulness, on the other hand, is always forgetfulness of oppression and the fact that our current happiness and equality is an illusion, while remembrance calls us to action; and art is the means through which memory can be secured.

Overcoming

If I have learned anything, if I have communicated anything, it will justify my final claim, wherein I hope to make good on my promise: Art that is dead, art that is memory–in a name, Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*–is an accusation against a world that has refused to become equal, that has rejected the project of man's liberation and enforced his spiritual, material oppression. The aesthetic experience of remembrance calls to us, like the wreckage of history before the angel's feet, to salvage the principle of redemption within and out of that wreckage, while yet being propelled forever into the future. Memory is the refuge wherein we are able to transform the destruction and oppression carried out by the world's victors into a spirit of equality and liberation. But this memory is also always and necessarily an accusation against our cowardice and contentment with an accustomed but illusory happiness. This is the pain, sorrow, and guilt of art that finds its expression in the experience of its own death.

We are the heirs of Schwitters's Merz theater, but it can only haunt us with the ghosts of its players: Kurt is nailing a broken train to the wall, Ernst is holding the glue, the mice scurry, Helma watches in silence–their forms float before one's mind within an imagined world that cannot be imagined, for its death is irrevocable. The grottoes silently stare from within their plaster tomb; his son's death mask is mute but immune; the columns and walls stand tall, bend, and at last break. A ruin that has not even the pieces of its building, for the ground has been cleared and prepared for a new building that cannot hope to due justice to its heritage. We realize, however, that its memory is all, at last, we have, and it is with this material that we must come to terms or be overwhelmed by our own impotence: to, in short, make whole what has been smashed, or let the pieces float away into the sea of lost time. The accusation demands that the longing and frustrated happiness of which art itself is can become a force for changing, perhaps only first ourselves,

perhaps only then our relation to our friends and country, but someday near or far for the changing of the world. But it is always as a half moon, who gleams at us in the darkness of the night, provoking us with the uncertainty of whether it is growing into wholeness, or vanishing into nothing.

If memory is capable of transforming the world, it must come first as an aesthetic presence within the individual subject–in this case, it must come into myself. From its inception as an aesthetic experience, its force rests secondly in its capacity to be transmitted, to, in effect, be reproduced in the minds of others. But one cannot accomplish this with history alone or theory alone, nor one's self alone, but they must all cooperate and draw on the strengths of each other: history provides the material, theory the approach, and the self provides the subject who must experience and give shape. That is why I have written this the way I have, for I am myself the principle of the work's liberation from death into spirit–into memory–into the present out of the wreckage of the past. The spirit becomes politic, the politic becomes spirit, the weight of sorrow returns in the work of art to thrust us into the present. And here we stand abandoned but proud, fractured and pitiable, but alive. Here we confront Hitler and Fascism, here we confront the perpetuation of man's inhumanity to man, here we confront the failures and the refuse, here we confront ourselves against ourselves, here we confront society, art, redemption, oppression. For if we do not confront them here, we will never confront them. We will never inherent the fullness of our past but only be accused by it as cowards, corrupted and homogenized within the bankruptcy of universals to guarantee happiness to the fragmented.

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